

Knights' Tales: Looking at Representations of the Knight on Film

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Introduction

In the work *Travels in Hyperreality*, Umberto Eco states: “It seems people like the Middle Ages” (61). Judging by the vast number of films produced with a medieval background or with characters dated from the Middle Ages, like *Robin Hood*, it looks like Eco was probably right. In truth, over the 20th and 21st centuries filmmakers have turned to medieval subjects as a source for plots. The films that result from this return to the past are commonly known as medieval films¹, a term which has come to denote films that portray the Middle Ages. While there are different adaptations with distinct storylines, it is interesting to notice that the figure of the knight, perhaps more than any other, has gained a role so significant that the depiction of a man on horseback is often enough for viewers to identify a film as “medieval”.

Leading figures during the European Middle Ages, knights dominated the medieval period and became one of its most emblematic symbols. However, it was only in the 11th century that these men started acquiring a specific status and only later did knighthood and chivalry become tied, a fact frequently overlooked by filmmakers. In addition, the medieval subjects used are often simplified for mass audiences, which can lead to the development of stereotyped characters like “the knight in shining armour” or “the damsel in distress”. Therefore, one inevitably wonders to what

¹ The term “medievalistic film” has also been used to refer to this kind of cinematic adaptation. However, although it obviously reinforces the idea that these films are works of medievalism, “medieval film” is the commonly used term in academic research and publications, which is why it will henceforth be used in this article as well.

extent our opinion about medieval knights is affected by on-screen representations. To address such issues this article will begin by briefly discussing knights' roles in the Middle Ages and their evolution from a group of mounted warriors to a powerful elite of chivalrous horsemen. Second, it will consider how the European medieval knight has been depicted in English-speaking cinematic representations, addressing questions like: "what different kinds of 'medieval films' are there?" and "how important is accuracy?"

'The bravest and finest': Cavalry in the Middle Ages

The Knight is an elusive, chameleon-like figure; the moment we try to define him, he appears in a different guise. His forerunners first appear against the background of the anarchy of ninth and tenth century society. They are little more than simple fighting men, skilled in horsemanship and the use of arms, valued for their function as defenders and feared as potential disturbers of the peace. (Barber 21)

Unlike what we are sometimes led to believe by modern adaptations of medieval subjects, the knight's place in medieval society is not easily understood or particularly clear as: a) their role in the social sphere changed throughout the Middle Ages; and b) most of the information we have access to is found in romance, *chasons de geste*, and in records of ceremonies in which squires were made into knights.² However, by simply looking at the cavalry in the 11th century, we can easily grasp how different it was to the mounted warriors of previous centuries.

Cavalry began not as elite, but as a group of warriors whose ability to ride a horse into battle and fight on horseback distinguished them from the remaining combatants. Although the legions of the Roman Empire had a cavalry, their strength lay mostly in their powerful infantry and only towards the 4th century (late Roman Empire) did Roman cavalry start having an increasingly important role in battle. It was only after the invasions carried out by the peoples in northern Europe that there was an

² Cf. Barber, Richard. *The Knight and Chivalry*. Woodbridge: Barbell, 1995.

increase in the number of warriors who were able to fight on horseback. The development of this new armed force was slow especially because, on the one hand, the adoption of stirrups, which increased the stability of the rider's seat, happened later in the 8th century, and, on the other hand, it was very expensive to arm and provide for knights and their horses. Furthermore, it was only in the 6th century that economy and civil society improved sufficiently to allow a class of semi-professional soldiers to re-emerge.

These warriors could either be men whose superiority in battle lay in their riding and fighting skills or vassals who distinguished themselves in combat. Mounted warriors were engaged to join a lord's army, defend his domains during war, and maintain peace. For their loyalty, bravery and skilfulness, the lord ensured them a place, usually in his court, where they lived and trained. Under the feudal system, it was also the lord who supplied the knights' equipment.

Initially, the bond between a lord and a mounted warrior consisted of nothing more than an oath a soldier could break in favour of a better position in a different court. Solemn contracts, called "commendations", only became common by the 7th century in a formal ceremony of homage. Finally, in the 8th century the system of vassalage was operating from the highest to the lowest levels of society. From this moment on a new class was born composed of men whose families were well-established, but not necessarily noble, or newcomers who had made fortunes through successful adventures.³ Thus, there is a clear distinction between these warriors and the nobility, who possessed an older genealogy and was at first more powerful. According to George Duby, in *The Chivalrous Society*, the title "noble men" was attributed to all knights in the first decades of the 14th century, which, alongside with landholding and arranged marriages to women of noble birth, led to a complete merge of both groups. However, Richard Barber in *The Knight and Chivalry* claims that the distinction between the mounted warrior and the older nobility was already gradually eroding by the 12th century. As a result, although it remains under debate, we know that from the 11th century onwards being a knight was more than simply being a soldier on horseback.

³ Cf. Milliken, E. K. *Chivalry in the Middle Ages*. London: MacMillan, 1968.

There are three main reasons that allow us to identify when a mounted warrior came to be seen as a knight. Firstly, formal knighting ceremonies were developed. These became central moments in a knight's life and marked the coming of age of a warrior and the completion of his military apprenticeship. Barber tells us that: "The idea that distinguishes knighthood from the mounted warrior is that of an elite, selected group, with a formal ceremony of admission" (27). Secondly, a deep-seated sense of pride in descent grew, and a restriction on entry to the ranks of knight was established. Men of low birth were soon deemed unfit and the initial notion that any knight could dub whomever he wanted was replaced by the idea of hierarchy. Thirdly, around the 13th century, a series of ideological transformations, which were initially aimed at controlling martial energies, took place, becoming a crucial part of a knight's honour code. According to Ramon Llull⁴ in *The Book of the Order of Chivalry or Knighthood* (c. 1279-1283) "the duty of a Knight is to support and defend the Holy Catholic Faith" (II. 2.) and "to support and defend his earthly lord" (II.8). About the moral characteristics of a knight, Llul adds that "(...) justice, wisdom, charity, loyalty, truth, humility, strength, hope, promptness and all other similar virtues pertain to the preparedness of the Knight's soul" (II.11). As a result, we can suppose that it was no longer enough for a knight to be a skilled warrior, he also had to be courteous, protect ladies and damsels, fight for justice and the nation, defend the Church and the Christian faith, and be honest, loyal and true to this lord and fellow knight.

Obviously such change had an undeniable influence on knighthood, transforming the rude warrior into an idealistic figure. Why is such a figure so appealing though? What makes modern audience so fascinated with the Middle Ages and knighthood in particular?

In "Boys to Men: Medievalism and Masculinity in Star Wars and E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial", Tom Henthorne suggests that the medieval period is often used "to affirm the existing social order by idealizing the Middle Ages as a period of peace and order, when both convention and authority were respected" (73-74). Perhaps, to a certain extent, this is so

⁴ Ramon Llul, Anglicized Raymond Lull, was an important Majorcan philosopher, writer, logician and a Franciscan tertiary.

but, as Umberto Eco pointed out, the concept that each person has of the Middle Ages is incredibly diverse and one must first determine, like he did, “which Middle Ages one is dreaming of” (68)? Almost two decades later, in “Beyond Historical Accuracy: A Postmodern View of Movies and Medievalism”, Keith Kelly supports this idea, stating:

The Middle Ages succeeds in being many things for a modern audience: a mythic world where archetypal individuals or even archetypal cultures can take believable form, a realm where spirituality and even magic can be accepted without question, a time of uncomplicated heroism, of visceral violence, of injustice, of moral rigor and of depraved fanaticism. (16)

If one “dreams” of the Middle Ages as a period of “uncomplicated heroism”, the knight who is fantasized as a warrior with a code, a hero and often a saviour, would certainly fit as the perfect main character for traditional cinema. Let us then look at how the knight is depicted in English-speaking ‘medieval films’ and find out which Middle Ages are we dreaming of when we enter a film theatre.

Knights’ on Screen: Selected Tales

The truth is this, the cut fell to the Knight,
Which everybody greeted with delight.
And tell his tale he must (...)
And in a cheerful style he then began
At once to tell his tale, and thus it ran.
(Chaucer 25-26)

Chivalry was declining in Geoffrey Chaucer’s day, but in the author’s renowned work *The Canterbury Tales* (c. 1386-1387), “The Knight’s Tale” is the first of the collection of stories. Although this tale was most likely intended to show knights’ flaws, it definitely also comes to prove the importance this social class still had at the time of its writing. Today, as we turn to cinematic representations, it is clear that the knights depicted on screen are often the idealized figures of the late Middle Ages. These hero-knights wear shiny armours; they are tall, handsome, brave, and, as a result, time and again take the main role in these adaptations.

Medieval films⁵ do not constitute a genre, like the melodrama, for instance, but are thought of as a genre of medievalism, which according to Kevin J. Harty: “takes a long view in which the present and the future can be studied in light of the past and the past can be reimagined in light of the present and the future” (3). Simply put, and using William Woods’ words, “‘medievalism’ may be defined as simply looking back and (...) imagining our past” (39). Such definition seems to suit the numerous medieval films produced since Cinema was born in 1895.⁶ In fact, English-speaking medieval films focus on various subjects that range from the early Middle Ages (with a number of screen adaptations of the Old English poem *Beowulf*⁷), to the late 14th century. While, on the one hand, some medieval films are inspired by literature⁸, such as *Sword of the Valiant: The Legend of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (Dir. Stephen Weeks, 1984), based on the anonymous poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. On the other hand, other films steam from historical events, like *The Seventh Seal* (Dir. Ingmar Bergman, 1957; often considered the best film about the Black Death in medieval Europe⁹) or figures, like Joan of Arc or Richard the

⁵ While, as we have seen, the term medieval film is applied to movies related to and set in the Middle Ages, no film can obviously be truly “medieval” in origin.

⁶ In 1895 the Lumière brothers, Auguste and Louis, shot their first film that showed workers leaving the Lumière Factory. Later that year, the Lumières started private showings of their films which were followed by public screenings in the basement of a café in Paris. In 1897, Georges Méliès presented the first of his cinematic retellings of the life of Joan of Arc and in the following year, Georges Hatot directed a film entitled *Jeanne D’Arc*.

⁷ Some adaptations of the medieval poem *Beowulf* are: *Beowulf* (Dir. Yuri Kulakov, 1998), *Beowulf and Grendel* (Dir. Sturla Gunnarsson, 2005) and *Beowulf* (Dir. Robert Zemeckis, 2007).

⁸ Other examples of medieval films based on literary works are *The Canterbury Tales* (Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1972) and *Morte d’Arthur* (Dir. Gillian Lynne, 1984).

⁹ The Black Plague, one of the most devastating pandemics which peaked in Europe around the years 1348-50, has been a source for medieval films including: *Black Death* (Dir. Christopher Smith, 2010) and *Season of the Witch* (Dir. Dominic Sena, 2011). Other historical events which have been adapted by medieval films are, for instance, the crusades, which we will analyze further on.

Lionheart.¹⁰ Notwithstanding, it is clear that most medieval films are often closer to works of fiction than to accurate historical representations.

Perhaps, because medieval films partake in a “conversation with the past” (Kelly 7), they have frequently been a target of criticism by medievalists. However, regardless of their popularity or acceptance within academia, these movies seem to have a special allure for audiences, which is probably why there is an enormous list of films¹¹ dedicated to the Middle Ages. Some of the most commercially successful medieval films have been released in the 21st century and include *Robin Hood* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2010) which has made an estimate \$321,669,741 worldwide; *King Arthur* (Dir. Antoine Fuqua, 2004) with an estimated gross of \$203,567,857 worldwide; and *Beowulf* (Dir. Robert Zemeckis, 2007) that has made an estimated total of \$82,195,215 in the US alone and a worldwide gross of \$196,149,662.¹²

For the purpose of this work, we shall focus on medieval films that feature knights as core characters to their plots. Hence, we have come to divide these films into four main types. They are: Arthurian Films, Knight Films, Crusades Films and Time Travel Films.

Arthurian Films are dedicated to the legend of Britain's mythical once and future king, Arthur, and his Knights of the Round Table. Names such as Lancelot, Gawain, Tristan, Percival, and Galahad have become a part of our collective imaginary and the Arthurian legend is today, as it was during the Middle Ages, a source of renewed adventures. Examples of Arthurian Films can be found in *Camelot* (Dir. Marty Callner, 1967), *Excalibur* (Dir. John Boorman, 1981), *First Knight* (Dir., Jerry Zucker 1995), *King Arthur*, *Tristan + Isolde* (Dir. Kevin Reynolds, 2006), and so on, in which the focus is clearly on the knights of Camelot and their

¹⁰ Of the many cinematic envisions of Joan of Arc's life, we can point out *Jeanne d'Arc* (Dir. Georges Méliés, 1897), *Jeanne la pucelle* (Dir. Jacques Rivette, 1994) and *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc* (Dir. Luc Besson, 1999).

¹¹ For a listing of medieval films see Harty, Kevin J. *The Reel Middle Ages. American, Western and Eastern European, Middle Eastern, and Asian Films about Medieval Europe*. Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, 1999.

¹² All the estimated gross profit is in accordance with the information made available at the website <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/?ref=ft>

adventures. According to Nickolas Haydock, in *Movie Medievalism*, Arthurian legend remains one of the West's master myths because:

(...) Arthur is capable of embodying almost any desire — romantic, rationalist, or racist; nationalistic, nostalgic, or New Age; fundamentalist, fascist, or futuristic; postcolonial, postideological, or even post-Twin Towers. Indeed it is possible to take the temperature of almost any Western age or society simply by attending to what it makes of his story. (165)

Since Arthurian Films centre their plots on knights' adventures, it seems that these can also be considered under the title of *Knight Films*. However, because of the deep-set nature of Arthurian myth in Western culture, we believe they stand as a separate subgenre. Knight Films are focused on the exploits, journeys, and undertakings of knights, who are not related to Arthur's court, in what is generally a process of self-discovery. An example of these films can be seen, for instance, in *Ladyhawke* (Dir. Richard Donner, 1985) and *A Knight's Tale* (Dir. Brian Helgeland, 2001). In the former, while listening to songs like "We will Rock you" by Queen, the audience follows the tale of William Thatcher, a squire of low birth who through his jousting skills becomes a full knight. Interestingly both Knight and Arthurian Films often feature traveling, either in a country or to foreign lands. Nonetheless, no medieval film better represents journeys to far-off territories than Crusades Films.

Distinct from the remaining medieval films, *Crusade Films* are linked to a specific historical time, the period of the crusades (11th to the 13th century), and to a particular geographical location, Jerusalem. Films such as *The Crusades* (Dir. Cecil B. DeMille, 1935), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (Dir. Ridley Scott, 2005) can be taken as examples of this group. These adaptations are most commonly based on the six major crusades against the Muslim territories in the East, representing the trip of one or more knights from the West to the Holy Land where they are meant to restore Christianity by fighting against the infidels. In this kind of adaptation the trip often ends up being one of self-discovery. A clear instance of this is Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* where young Balian of Ibelin¹³

¹³ Balian of Ibelin (c.1143-1193) was a French noble in the crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem

embarks on a journey to Jerusalem which will forever change him.

Finally, there are medieval films that depict the journey as a crucial part of the film's plot, but unlike Crusades Films, in which the characters geographically travel from one point to another, in *Time Travel Films* the characters' trip is one across time. This type of plot variation usually steams from Mark Twain's well-known novel *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889). In fact, there are several on-screen adaptations of Twain's work, like *A Connecticut Yankee* (Dir. David Butler, 1931) and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (Dir. Tay Garnett, 1949), among many others. The premise of this type of medieval film is generally the same: someone from the present travels back to medieval Europe or, although less common, someone from the Middle Ages is transported into the present. In films such as *A Knight in Camelot* (Dir. Roger Young, 1998), *Black Knight* (Dir. Gil Junger, 2001), and *Timeline* (Dir. Richard Donner, 2003) we can find examples of this kind of medieval film in which the time-traveling main characters find themselves amidst an unknown land, where they normally help solve conflicts.

In addition to these medieval films, we can also point out the ones that feature medieval elements but are not considered medieval as they are not set in the Middle Ages, a feature that ultimately is what distinguishes medieval films. These movies can be science fiction films, like the *Star Wars* series (Dir. George Lucas, 1977-2005), which, with its Jedi Knights and light sabers, clearly invoke a medieval past; or fantasy films, like the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Dir. Peter Jackson, 2001-2003). This is especially true of the last film, *The Return of The King* (2003), that undoubtedly reminds of Arthur — the King that was and will be, the King that shall return when his people need the most. Finally, there are also adventure films in which the search for an item or an object from the Middle Ages is key to the plot. These films are set in the present time and portray modern heroes' quests to obtain an ancient artifact, the most famous one being the Holy Grail. Examples of this can be found in the films *Indiana Jones and*

and is an actual historical figure. The film *Kingdom of Heaven* provides a highly fictionalized version of Balin as the illegitimate son of Godfrey the Baron of Ibelin (a fictional character).

the Last Crusade (Dir. Steven Spielberg, 1989) and *The Da Vinci Code* (Dir. Ron Howard, 2006).

Conclusion: Films Get Medieval

Medieval films have been a constant throughout the life of cinema, since the silent era with Georges Méliès silent movie *Jeanne d'Arc* to the 21st century, their popularity is seemingly unweaving. The reasons as to why they are so well-liked probably have to do with the fact that the Middle Ages succeed in being many things for its modern audience. As Umberto Eco stated in the work *Travels in Hyperreality*, we have always patched up or mended the Middle Ages “in order to meet the vital requirements of different periods” (68) so topics like heroism, gender relationships, loyalty, kinship and religion can all be related to the medieval period. In his article “Authenticating Realism in Medieval Movie”, William Woods goes on to ask: “Would we recognize real medieval life if we saw it?” (39) Indeed our view of the Middle Ages seems to be so deeply influenced by films, books, paintings, and so on, that it is difficult to claim without doubts what being medieval is or is not. Let us then go back to the question asked in the beginning of this paper: ‘To what extent is our opinion about medieval knights affected by on-screen representations?’

In 2010 Paul Sturtevant made a study in which a number of viewers were invited to watch films and comment on how “medieval” these appeared to be. When summarizing the conclusions drawn from this research, the author stated: “(...) participants’ previous knowledge of the period was a greater influence on their interpretation of the film than what they saw. Participants sometimes constructed false memories in line with their expectations, and were most excited about the parts of the films which fit with their knowledge” (268). If one considers these results, then it would look as if we are all ‘dreaming’ of a medieval period that fits the memories we have established, whether in our childhood, through our studies or, of course, through the films we have watched. Therefore, we might assume that a medieval film which does not fit into what we deem to be “medieval” will be regarded as “not good” or “inaccurate” for, like William Woods states: “(...) despite their mythic overtones and romance coloring, films with medieval themes, like medieval histories, are required by their

audiences to deliver a convincing picture (...)” (39). Consequently, how we perceive and accept the representation of knights on screen is deeply intertwined with our own ideas of what a knight is, which means that medieval films are, in fact, a product of a particular cultural moment — the time they were produced in and the audience who watched them. Therefore, since, ultimately, all of us are ‘dreaming’ about our own Middle Ages, we could conclude that it is not the cinematic representations that deeply affect the viewer’s ideas about the Middle Ages, but it is the spectator who influences the moving pictures depicted on-screen.

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ABSTRACT

The knight dominated the medieval world and distinguished it from the classical era. However, in the early Middle Ages the knight was little more than a mounted warrior whose strength and prowess in battle could be procured by the wealthiest lord. In fact, it was only in the 11th century that these men started acquiring a specific status and only later did knighthood and chivalry become tied. Today, the knight remains a leading figure and is at the center of many modern adaptations of the medieval period.

The present paper will focus on different portrayals of the knight in English-speaking films. What medieval features are kept? To what extent is accuracy important? How do these films contribute to our own modern day view of the knight and the Middle Ages? These are some of the questions this short paper seeks to answer.

KEYWORDS

Medieval Film; Knights; Medievalism; Adaptations; Middle Ages

RESUMO

O cavaleiro dominou o mundo medieval, distinguindo-o do período clássico. Contudo, no início da Idade Média, o cavaleiro era pouco mais que um guerreiro montado cuja força e destreza em batalha podia ser adquirida pelo senhor mais rico. De facto, foi somente no século XI que estes homens alcançaram um estatuto específico e apenas mais tarde os conceitos de cavalaria e cavalheirismo foram associados. Hoje, o cavaleiro continua a ser uma figura de relevo, ocupando, por isso, um lugar de destaque em muitas adaptações modernas do período medieval.

O artigo irá concentrar-se em representações do cavaleiro em filmes falados em inglês. Que características medievais são mantidas? Até que ponto é que questões de fidelidade são importantes? Como contribuem estes filmes para a visão

actual do cavaleiro e da Idade Média? Estas são algumas das questões que este breve estudo pretende responder.

PALAVRAS CHAVE

Filmes Medievais; Cavaleiros; Medievalismo; Adaptações; Idade Média
